



SHEIKH ABDULLA

His Life And Ideals

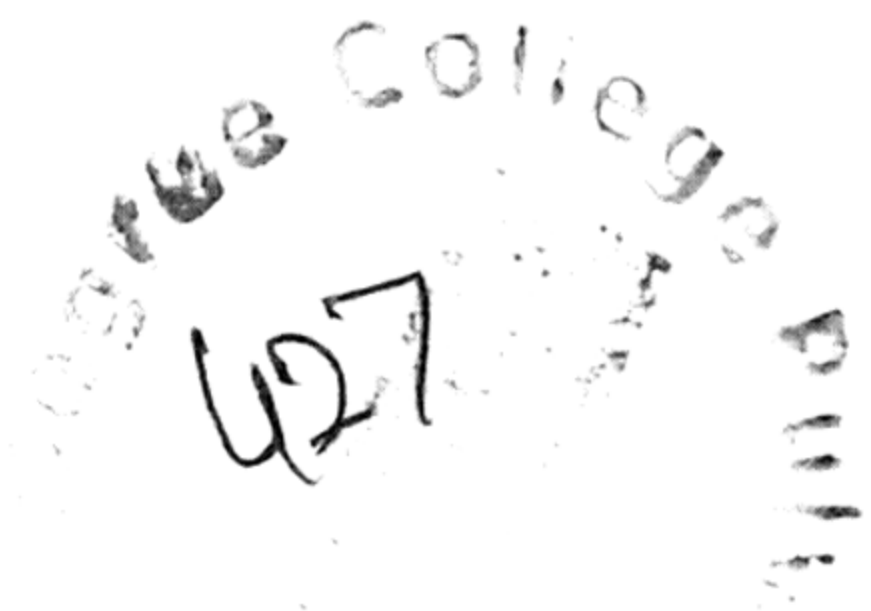
Sheikh Abdullah

HIS LIFE AND IDEALS

BY

B. P. L. BEDI & FREDA BEDI

SRINAGAR - KASHMIR



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PRICE ANNAS TWELVE

The early December of 1905 in Kashmir was like any other. The poplars in village Soura were bare and bleached like fishbones; a few late leaves, brown-gold, floated down from the trees with the first flakes of the winter snow, and early shafts of icy wind shivered through the rickety doors of the mud and wood structures where the poor lived.

And the poor were legion. Even the house of the shawl-makers, and the long shed they called their factory, looked comparatively affluent, though it was simple enough by Srinagar standards, six miles away. For the last two months even there the atmosphere was bleak. Sheikh Mohammad Ibrahim had died leaving five sons and a daughter, and now on the fifth of December, posthumously, another little branch of the parent tree was budding. A baby boy lay in the glad and sorrowing arms of a widowed mother. They called him Mohammed Abdulla.

He was a big and sturdy child, and his playmates were the peasant boys of Soura, the children of the workers in the little *pashmina* workshop that his brothers were carrying on. In his young world they were equal citizens, to be judged by their qualities and not by their clothes: it was a child's republic where the strong and the generous and the big of heart were the heroes.

It went on like this until Mohammed Abdulla was twelve, until the day when that first bright dream was shattered into a thousand fragments.

Into The Reality Of Poverty

One of companions died. He was a boy of eighteen, with more than the usual beauty of Kashmiri young men, dark-haired, fair of skin. It was a rapid death; pthysis, the doctor said. But his weeping sisters and the old father whom he maintained by working at shawl-making said otherwise. "He earned so little" they cried. "And the money-lender came every morning and took away a big piece of it. Because he was too sensitive to bear abuse, he gave beyond the borderline of hunger. The family he fed on rice and rice water; he himself made bread of the bare husk. His growing body demanded food; the fever came and burnt it away"

On that day Sheikh Mohammed Abdulla had his second birth, the birth into the reality of poverty, of the inexorable divisions between man and man. The boy's republic was an iridescent bubble that floated away into the crystal air, and at his feet lay the beautiful body of his friend, the wage-earner and rice-giver, whom even God had not spared. Deepest and most bitter of all was the thought that, in all the days of their playing, this had not been told to him.

So the child grew to manhood and went to Lahore. Inside him the fires of resentment still burned stubbornly; the embers were fanned

afresh by the look of the coolies dragging loads in the city, the same Kashmiri *hattos* of the pointed caps who had been driven by want and cold to earn money by casual labour in the plains. One thought dominated his mind. He must work hard: for the sake of his poor countrymen, he must prepare himself for the future.

In Kashmir, over ninety per cent of the inhabitants of the valley were Muslims, who were little more than the untouchables, the beasts of burden of a heartless and autocratic administration. It was easy in those days to identify poverty with the Muslims, for the Pandit intelligentsia dominated the Services, and the Jammu Dogras were a caste maintaining their rule by force of arms. The poor, the peasants, the day-labourers, the artisans were all Muslims; among them education was a rarity. To Mohammed Abdulla came the primary call that he should educate himself to the highest pinnacle that he could scale. The object was M. Sc. and the University was Aligarh.

It was accomplished only by sacrifice of outside diversions, and with some strain on the fatherless family. The dynamic Mohammad Abdulla of to-day with the patience and tenacious strength that gave solidity to his later effort poured out his energy in the laboratory and lecture room, not in the debating halls and clubs.

Finally, by the beginning of the thirties the groundwork was dug. Mohammed Abdulla came back to Kashmir, and with him a group of half a dozen young men, the pioneer Muslim graduates.

They Had Hope

They had hope. The glory of it still aureoled them, in spite of the indifferent welcome they received from those who should have recruited them in the Services of the State. They had to keep the link between themselves alive, if their hope was to live too. So was founded the simple reading room in Fateh Kadal where the graduates met and discussed the future of Kashmir.

From there the articles were written and the papers distributed in which for the first time the needs of the Kashmiri people were voiced. The young leader carried them about tucked under his arm, well wrapped up under his shawl. But other problems pressed themselves on his consciousness: his family and the needs of his work, money, paper, transport. He took a job as a teacher of science, and with the eighty rupees he earned he managed to steer his way, upstream.

In the meantime, the storm was blowing in from the Jammu side. An insult to a Muslim policeman in Jammu, the banning of Urdu speeches even in the mosques, was the immediate pattern of mood and incident that swept Kashmir into the maelstrom. Mohammed Abdulla was waiting, the people were waiting, the stage was set. The first speech was delivered in the Jamia Masjid; it was the melting of the winter snows, and the waters rushed headlong down the valley. Twenty thousand people followed the young man through the streets. He had dared to defy tyranny. He was theirs. Their voice, the secret story of their hearts.

So began the people's movement of Kashmir. The young teacher lost his service. Martial law, 19 L promulgated, public flogging, firing, gave the waves of the poor their first baptism of fire. Backwards and forwards the tide pulsed: 'I can't even remember how many times I was arrested, how many times the anger of the people got me released' says the leader who from those early days was Sher-i-Kashmir, the Lion of the Mountain.

The movement reverberated into India itself. Sir Mohammed Iqbal, the poet, and the Kashmir Committee that had been set up in the Punjab took up the cause of the Kashmiri people; with their support the Muslim Conference was formed of which Sheikh Abdulla was the original President.

The National Outlook

But from the very early days of the movement Sher-i-Kashmir marked himself out as a man and a leader who though founder of an organisation known as the Muslim Conference, was concerned with men and women in their struggle against want and oppression, with basic human needs for a decent living standard. As through his experience of life in the valley and a widening number of visits to outside areas he came to know that the poor were not only Muslim, that there were Sikh landless labourers, Pandit farmers scratching a meagre existence from the soil, underpaid clerks and peons of all communities, by the logic of his own mental outlook he was drawn into a way of thinking which might be called national, or Kashmiri. The communal colour of his organisation changed

with his own mind and experience. By 1939, the majority of the Muslim Conference group changed their name to National Conference, and ratified an attitude which time had of itself matured.

By 1939, the founder-group of the workers of the National Conference had already proved their value as soldiers of the struggle for responsible government. From the Pandits had come Pandit Kayshyapbandhu and Pandit Shyam Lal Saraf; from the Sikhs Sardar Buddh Singh, venerable and white-bearded Tyagiji. All the genuine old members of the Muslim Conference group were at their posts Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed, Ghulam Mohammed Sadiq, Mirza Mohammed Afzal Beg, Maulana Mohammed Sayeed, Ghulam Mohyuddin, Soofi Mohammad Akbar.

All were young : their ages may be judged by the fact that today the oldest member of the group is the Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, and he is only 43. Except for the white beard of Sardar Buddh Singh, and Colonel Pir Mohammed who represents the Jammu Muslims and was not one of the original pioneers, the age level of the Cabinet must be one of the lowest not only in India, but in the world. It is an average of forty.

From the very earliest days of the organisation, the constantly recurring note of Sher-i-Kashmir's speeches has been precisely the note of the brotherhood of the oppressed, a prophetic almost visionary *motif* of the victory of Truth, of the ultimate and necessary triumph of the toilers.

A man's words are the fibre of his being, the bridges between his integral spirit and the diffuse outside world. More, they are the direct and personal links between himself and the separate members of the crowd before him when he speaks. It is the sign of greatness, of sincerity, that the underlying spirit of a man's speeches may be one, whatever the phases of the movement, changing circumstances, new policies, developing ideas. Such a test illumines Gandhi, and the simple golden words that he said, wrote, printed. It reveals the true Jawaharlal. That test too brings out the simplicity and greatness of the youngest, the least intimately known, of the Great Three, Sheikh Mohammed Abdulla, Sher-i-Kashmir.

New Kashmir.

Perhaps because the Sher-i-Kashmir is of a younger generation there are certain distinctive qualities of his leadership. It is based on a socialist approach to Kashmir and Indian problems; it is concrete and factual. The New Kashmir programme, of which all India now knows, was formulated in 1944. It envisages a state where science will eliminate poverty; where political democracy will rest securely on economic planning and the feudalism, autocracy and vested interests of the old regime will be given no quarter.

The message of New Kashmir is an unfolding of the spirit of the inspiring preamble to its Constitution:—

"WE, THE PEOPLE OF JAMMU, KASHMIR, LADAKH AND THE FRONTIER REGIONS, INCLUDING POONCH AND CHINANI ILAQAS — commonly known as Jammu and Kashmir State—in order to perfect our union in the fullest equality and self-determination, to raise ourselves and our children forever from the abyss of oppression and poverty, degradation and superstition, from medieval darkness and ignorance, into the sunlit valleys of plenty ruled by freedom, science and honest toil, in worthy participation of the historic resurgence of the peoples of the East, and the working masses of the world, and in determination to make this our country a dazzling gem upon the snowy bosom of Asia, DO PROPOSE AND PROPOUND THE FOLLOWING CONSTITUTION OF OUR STATE:"

Armed with a more definitive purpose, the National Conference increased in confidence and strength, and in 1946 the movement had another leap forward. The "Quit Kashmir" agitation is yet another key to the thought processes of the man who led it. "Quit Kashmir" was directed against the very idea of feudal royal rights, against a corrupt administration, and the ruling Dogra caste. It was, as was the composition of the Conference itself, a united national fight, of Muslims, Pandits, Sikhs, against an anti-democratic State set-up. It was in no sense a Muslim struggle against a Hindu Maharajah.

Quit Kashmir.

This "Quit Kashmir" struggle placed Kashmir at the head of the Indian States' peoples'

movement, of which Sheikh Abdulla had already become the elected president. The great courage of the Kashmiri people in that hour of trial, the way in which they kept up the fight, their underground organisation, the willingness of the poor of Kashmir to bear all the torments inflicted on them in the name of their beloved leader, took Kashmir straight into the world headlines.

It is only natural that with their long years of similar work and trial Sher-i-Kashmir and his colleagues should have been more drawn to the Indian Independence movement than to the Muslim League and its Pakistan ideology.

In the days when the majority of the Indian Muslims had fallen a prey to the baleful fascination of the "Two-nation" theory, it was the voice of Sheikh Abdulla which was most often raised against it. During all the attempts made by Jinnah Sahib to convert the Kashmir leader to his point of view, Sheikh Abdulla steadily resisted the suggestion that he should change the national character of his organisation or spread communal poison in Kashmir.

Kashmir throughout its history has shown that it has reached its peaks of greatness only when it has kept religious fanaticism at bay; that its true genius lies in the integration of cultures. From Lalitaditya, through the golden days of Zain-ul-abedin, its periods of humanism and tolerance have been the most prosperous and fruitful. Something of the ancient Kashmir spirit is reborn in Sheikh Abdulla; he has come to power in the dark days of post-partition India

to keep alight people's faith in the brotherhood of man and the oneness of religions.

To such a leader, with his faith in the inner grandeur of man, Jinnah and his hymns of hate could have no attraction. His instinctive leaning was towards the Congress, to Pandit Nehru, champion of the rights of the States people, above all to the great soul of Gandhiji, his gentle and inflexibly pure spirit.

During the dark hours of "Quit Kashmir", it was Jawaharlalji who faced the Dogra ruler's bayonets, Gandhiji who tried to move the Maharajah's heart to understanding. Jinnah remained aloof; the Muslims of the valley have not forgotten this signal witness of his indifference to their fate.

Not only did Jinnah and the Muslim League not support the Kashmir people; this Qaid-i-Azam also refused to take any part in the democratic movement of the States' people.

Invasion Enters Kashmir

On the release of Sheikh Sahib from Jail in the autumn of 1947, he made an appeal for responsible government in the State. Only then, he repeatedly said, could the people of Kashmir give their dispassionate judgment on the question of allegiance to one or the other dominion.

This attitude, the essence of democracy and of belief in his own countrymen, was typical of the man. Typical too of the movement and the men who were his right hand.

The brutal tribal-cum-Pakistan invasion put an end to such peaceful plans. Within a period of days and hours, the valley was faced with the choice between calling on Indian aid, and falling prey to the armed looters and butchers of Pakistan. In that terrible crisis, the call inevitably went to Delhi, and to the Prime Minister of India, to stand by Kashmir and all the men who had fought so bravely for freedom from oppression.

It was not unanswered. Indian and Kashmiri troops have cemented with blood their friendship begun so many years ago, the sacred ties of thousands of years of historical association.

Against Division and The 2-Nation Theory

Throughout this stormy, inspiring period, the steadiness of the Kashmiri people, their unity and determination, have proved once more that Kashmir can be, is, a mountain stronghold of the ideas for which B a p u j i died. They have presented an impregnable front of communal unity, in their women's organisations, in their militia, in the children's bands in the administration, in the very streets of city and village. The riot frenzy did not touch the valley. Constantly Sher-i-Kashmir sounded his familiar loved message of unity. "It is a war of ideologies we are fighting" he said, "not just a military battle. Kashmir stands for unity and against the two-nation theory on which the State of Pakistan is based". Countless times he has repeated his determination not to dissect the social fabric of Kashmiri life, has stressed the similarities in the

way of living of all the inhabitants of the valley. He has condemned most poignantly the men from Pakistan who "have murdered my children and sold my daughters for annas on the streets". Nothing could be simpler or more heartfelt than that reference to the children and girls, Hindu and Sikh, of Muzaffarabad.

This in fact, is the very crux of Sheikh Abdulla's life and ideals.....his opposition to the exclusive one - religion basis on which the Pakistan State and the Muslim League are built. To him, in a practical living way, all men are equal: he will not discriminate against a man or a group because they have not been born or converted into the religion to which he is personally so devoted, and in which his own family is rooted. In spite of his deeply religious mind (and nothing could be falser than the propaganda of Azad Kashmir that Sheikh Abdulla is a godless man) he is scientist and realist enough to realise that a just state must be just for all communities, and that one religion cannot be the basis of it "Secular democracy" is not a phrase to the National Conference and the man who leads it It is a way of life itself.

Nothing highlights this fundamental difference of approach between Kashmir and Azad Kashmir-Pakistan more than the very tone of their Radio programmes. Where the enemy radio is constantly broadcasting invectives against Hindus and Sikhs and denying them the right to live on Kashmir soil, Radio Kashmir, while exposing the doings of enemy leaders, never speaks in hate of the people, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh. Kashmir fights without

bitterness, with clean hands. Its battery is not hate, abuse, invective. It is based foursquare on its ideals of unity and its positive achievements.

The First Year Of Power.

The sincerity of Sheikh Abdulla and the National Conference has been underlined by the way they have implimented the promises of "New Kashmir" even in the few war-torn months of their holding of power. They have armed the centuries-long disarmed Kashmiri By their land reforms, the peasant now claims 75⁰/₀ of the crop, elects his own Zaildars and Lambar-dars. Co-operation is rooting itself firmly in the new State; the first experiment has been made of handing over a part of the Government Silk Factory for the workers' committee to run. The Kashmir University has been founded. The very text-books of the school child will be re-written by the beginning of the next school year.

Sheikh Abdulla is not just a clever politician: he is one of the vital minds of our generation. Kashmir is not just an awkward stormy corner of the Indian sub-continent. It is the birthplace of a new social order. What is happening inside Kashmir is not just a military or even a solely political battle. It is a constructive fight for a new way of living, for the vindication of the ideals of secular democracy for which Gandhiji walked on our earth and stained it red with his blood.

The valley of Kashmir may in fact be India's

war front, but it is far more than that. It is a land pulsing with new currents of thought, new being. Many visitors who have come to it go back refreshed. "I begin to feel normal again here" one eminent journalist said, "My optimism has come back again" said a Delhi Muslim.

Sher-i-Kashmir has given proof enough of his human approach to life, the completely non-communal trend of his thought. His enthusiastic support of Indian action in Hyderabad was another example of it.

But through all this we must not forget that, in spite of his naturally broad and un-exclusive mind, Sheikh Abdulla is a religious man, devoted to his own religion, Islam. His hold on the Kashmiris is not something apart from their religion; he truly expresses for them the inner greatness of it, its justice and tolerance. Sheikh Abdulla is as truly a Muslim as Bapuji was a Hindu. Both called all men brothers both poured out their very selves to fight cruelty, violence, fanaticism. The pinnacle of Mahatma Gandhi's holiness on contemporary can touch, but his spiritual heirs, Jawaharlal and Sher-i-Kashmir, are the world's pledges that his honesty and sincerity will live and will be the guiding star of the India that is to be.

The untold future lies before India and Kashmir. And in that future the lion-hearted Sher-i-Kashmir, still in his early forties, has a great and ever-unfolding part to play.

APPENDIX:—

Extracts from Sheikh Abdulla's speeches & statements Against Autocracy & Aggression

As "Quit Kashmir" Prisoner

From his Statement to the Court.

"Oppressed by the extreme poverty and lack of freedom and opportunity of the people of Jammu and Kashmir State, I and my colleagues of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, many of whom are behind prison bars or in exile today, have humbly sought to serve them during the past sixteen years. We have endeavoured to give faithful expression to the growing consciousness among the people of their imprescriptable rights, aspirations and desire for freedom. This has attracted the penal and preventive provisions of law. Where law is not based on the will of the people, it can lend itself to the suppression of their aspirations. Such law has no moral validity even though it may be enforced for a while. There is a law higher than that, the law that represents the people's will and secures their well-being, and there is the tribunal of human conscience, which judges the rulers and the ruled alike by standards which do not change by the arbitrary will of the most powerful. To that Law I gladly submit and that tribunal I shall face with confidence and without fear, leaving it to history and posterity to pronounce their verdict on the claims I and my colleagues have made not merely on behalf of the four million people of Jammu and Kashmir but also of the ninety-three million people of all the states of India. That claim has not been confined to the people of any particular race, or religion or colour. It applies to all, for I hold that humanity as a whole is indivisible by such barriers and human rights must always prevail.

The fundamental rights of all men and women to live and act as free beings, to make laws and fashion their political, social and economic fabric, so that they may advance the cause of human freedom and progress, are

inherent and cannot be denied though they may be suppressed for a while. I hold that sovereignty resides in the people, all relationships political, social, and economic derive authority from the collective will of the people.

* * *

It is a small matter whether I am imprisoned and tried and convicted. But it is no small matter that the people of Jammu and Kashmir suffer poverty, humiliation and degradation. It has been no small matter what they have endured during the violent repression and horror of the past two months and more, and what they are enduring now. These very events have demonstrated the justice of our demand and of our cry "Quit Kashmir". For a system of Government that can subsist only by pursuing such methods stands condemned. If my imprisonment and that of my colleagues' serves the cause to which we have dedicated ourselves, then it will be well with us and we shall take pride in thus serving our people and the land of our forefathers.

Kashmir is dear to us because of its beauty and its past traditions which are common to all who inhabit this land. But it is the future that calls to us and for which we labour, a future that will be the common heritage of all, and in which we as free men and women, linked organically with the rest of the India, will build the New Kashmir of our dreams. Then only shall we be worthy of the land we dwell in."

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As Kashmir Premier

Addressing the officials and public representatives on his
swearing in ceremony as the first popular Prime Minister,

"We shall reckon communalism and its propagation as a serious offence. We will not tolerate an outlook which makes a distinction between one community and another. My aim is to provide equal opportunity to all. The poor will not be denied advancement merely on account of the fact that poverty is a social disability."

Addressing a big audience which had collected to greet Shere-i-Kashmir, on the first day of his visit to the Government Central Secretariat at Srinagar, as Prime Minister.

"You are guiding not only the destiny of the forty lakhs of people living in the State, but you are today the beacon light for the whole of India. Even that great saint - Mahatma Gandhi - repeatedly stated this. Men of the eminence of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru have very often praised you for the wisdom you have shown in keeping yourselves free from the evil influence of communalism which swept the Punjab and other parts of India. They have not said this to please you. They have said this because it is true."



To My People

To the people in the war-torn town of Uri.

"While we have only heard of the atrocities committed by the raiders, you have been their victims. The raiders say that they came here to support the Muslims against Dogra autocracy. They used it as an excuse to loot and destroy our villages and commit atrocities on the people. It is known to you that when the National Conference was in the midst of a bitter struggle against autocracy, Pakistan leaders never thought it worthwhile to come to the aid of the Musalmans of the State. Instead, they gave moral support to the machinery which was crushing them. And yet they claim to be the supporters of the Muslims of the State: A true Muslim is one who has no ill-will towards others. In view of their un-Islamic deeds, the raiders have brought a slur on the fair name of Islam."



Our Stand

To the troops in Uri.

"Our war is not a war of territory. We cast no covetous eye on other's territory. This war is for vindication of high principles. It is a war between hatred and love, between truth and untruth. We will wage it to the last drop of our blood."

Farewell, Friends!

To an Indian Regiment.

"In Kashmir we had for years built up a joint front against the vicious two-nation theory and when we were attacked by Pakistan, unarmed as we were, what sustained us to meet this attack was Hindu-Muslim-Sikh Itihad."

"Fortunately, India came to our aid just when the enemy was battering at the gates of Srinagar. You were the first to come here. It is no small achievement to your credit that having gone through the agony and tragedy through which your Province had passed, you were not carried away by wild passion. Here the healthy atmosphere of communal unity healed your wounds and you conducted yourselves in a manner that endeared you to the hearts of everyone. You became the friends of the people as well as their defenders. Stories of your cordial fraternization with the civil population spread to the remote corners of the State."

The impression that you have left on the minds of the people of Kashmir is indelible. True to the ideals of Sikhism which is born to spread love and defend the weak, you checked the fire of communalism from spreading in Kashmir. You have played the part of the sentinels of Free India and judging by the manner in which you have conducted yourselves in Kashmir I have no doubt that you will help in making India great."

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Enemy No. 1

Address at Jammu

Thousands of Tribal raiders armed with modern weapons were sent to burn, loot and conquer Kashmir. But the people of Kashmir have halted them and are fighting them out of the country

Pakistan considers me its enemy No. 1. because I am prepared to sacrifice my life for service to all irrespective of caste, creed and colour.

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